DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 345 259 CS 213 317

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TITLE Assessment as a Team Effort: The Pearce Center Assessment Research Team.
PUB DATE Mar 92
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (43rd, Cincinnati, OH, March 19-21, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Skills; Higher Education; Program Descriptions; *Program Development; *Program Effectiveness; Undergraduate Students; *Writing Across the Curriculum
IDENTIFIERS Clemson University SC; Communication across the Curriculum; *Pearce Center for Professional Communication SC

ABSTRACT

Clemson University is addressing the related issues of: (1) how to integrate writing in courses throughout the curriculum; and (2) how to assess students' writing ability as well as the impact of assessment programs on that ability. Since 1990, the responsibility for addressing these two goals has been assumed by the Pearce Center for Professional Communication, whose broad mission is to develop programs to improve the communication skills of Clemson University's undergraduate students. Considerable evidence suggests that the Pearce Center and its Communication-across-the-Curriculum program have had an appreciable impact on the academic culture at the university. To document the effects of the program, the Pearce Center instituted an "assessment research team," in which four faculty members collaborated with faculty in other disciplines to develop communication-intensive projects and devise and implement measures to assess the effect of the resulting initiatives. The most significant challenge facing the research team was that what they set out to evaluate was by no means easy to measure. Since the team has met for only a short period of time, they cannot present definitive results nor attempt to defend a particular approach to program assessment. However, outlines of projects undertaken and reports on preliminary findings may prove useful as models for other institutions. (A brief description of 10 projects of the assessment research team, a summary of survey responses from faculty members who have attended communication-across-the-curriculum workshops, and a summary of interviews with 13 faculty members in the department of finance are attached.) (RS)

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Assessment as a Team Effort:

The Pearce Center Assessment Research Team

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Introduction

This paper will describe a multi-faceted model at Clemson University for combining the goals of program development with those of assessment. My remarks will specifically concern programs for improving the communication skills of Clemson's undergraduate students. The model I will be discussing, which we call the Assessment Research Team Model, represents our approach to making assessment an integral part of the effort not only to measure the effects of our programs but also to to improve their effectiveness.

The concept of the Assessment Research Team Model grew largely out of a dissatisfaction with the results of purely summative measures of students' writing abilities. In fact, the development of the assessment research team was initially informed by the conclusions of last year's study of Clemson students' writing ability, conducted as part of CHE's mandated assessment of Clemson's general education program, that found juniors were only slightly better writers than freshmen; the differences were not statistically significant. Clemson University's English department questioned these findings, which had been obtained by an independent testing agency, but a team of English teachers that regraded the writing samples came up with essentially the same results.

Yet, even though the English department's regrading confirmed that the testing agency had adequately assessed the quality of the writing samples, we are not convinced that the testing agency's instrument was appropriate for measuring its

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intended object. In short, the test relied on a single 50-minute writing sample, administered during a writing class but on a preselected topic unrelated to the course content; students were guaranteed anonymity and were assured the test would have no bearing on the evaluation of their performance in the course. Exit interviews with proctors confirmed that many freshmen--a notoriously paranoid and impressionable lot--took the test seriously, whereas the more streetwise upperclassmen, perhaps predictably, tended to blow it off as another of many irrelevant academic experiences. According to us, the finding that the upperclassmen wrote better--even if not that much better--than the freshmen under such circumstances could support the opposite conclusion that our writing program has significantly enhanced students' writing skills. If one group does better on a task without trying than another group that approaches the same task diligently, surely one might conclude that the former group is far more capable than the latter. My point, however, is not to quibble about the interpretation of the test results, but to challenge profoundly the assumption that an assessment of student writing produced outside the contexts of learning can yield either reliable or adequate measures of students' capabilities.

Considerable research in the field of composition demonstrates that the characteristics of writing differ significantly from discipline to discipline. Although there is a consensus that good writing generally exhibits specific characteristics--a clear sense of purpose and audience, internal organizational coherence, grammatical correctness, for example--each discipline has its own discursive conventions. There is no such thing, in other words, as a good writer in the abstract. The same person will be able to write effectively in some discourse communities but not in others.

These observations have powerful implications for both the teaching and the assessment of writing. First, they challenge the widespread assumption that the

teaching of writing should be primarily the responsibility of English departments. We may reasonably expect English departments to teach students a basic understanding of effective writing, but no English teacher or composition course can be expected to teach a horticulturist the discourse conventions in his field or an astrophysicist those in hers. This is knowledge that, at a certain level of specialization, only professionals in the disciplines possess and can impart. To learn to write as an engineer, engineering students need the opportunity to write as part of their experience of learning to become engineers; to a considerable extent, to be an engineer is to be able to write like one. Second, and by extension, the only reliable assessment of writing must take into account the contexts in which writing is produced. Ideally, assessment measures must be sensitive to the discourse conventions characteristic of each discipline. What this implies, for assessment purposes, is that we cannot rely on single universal measures but must instead employ a variety of measures at different points in students' academic careers.

Clemson University is presently trying to address these two related issues of (1) how to integrate writing in courses throughout the curriculum and (2) how to assess not only students' writing ability but also the impact of our programs on that ability.

Since 1990, the responsibility for addressing these two goals at Clemson University has been largely assumed by the Pearce Center for Professional Communication. Funded by a $1.5 million endowment, the Pearce Center for Professional Communication was established in 1990 at Clemson University with the broad mission of developing programs to improve the communication skills of the university's undergraduate students. The primary thrust of the Pearce Center's activity on campus has been to collaborate with faculty members in all disciplines to promote the integration of writing and speaking activities in courses across the curriculum. In

addition to providing consulting services to individual faculty members on a volunteer basis, the Pearce Center directs Clemson University's Communication-Across-the-Curriculum (CAC) program, which sponsors each year a number of workshops for the faculty on rationales and strategies for incorporating communication activities in the classroom. Specific workshops have addressed such topics as "Designing Assignments," "Evaluating Student Writing," "Oral Communication," "Collaborative Learning," and "Writing and Learning Connections." To date, over 300 of Clemson's 1100 faculty members, representing over 50 departments in all nine colleges, have attended at least one of our full-day workshops.

Considerable evidence suggests that the Pearce Center and the CAC program have had an appreciable impact on the academic culture at Clemson University. The center routinely receives calls from faculty members in different disciplines who report on innovative communication assignments they have adapted to their courses. In the past month alone, we have heard from an accounting professor who wanted our opinion of his proposed conference presentation on using "one-minute" essays in his class; a horticulture professor who called to rave about the experience of having his students write poems about ecological issues; a PRTM professor who is submitting an article to a forestry journal based on collaborative learning strategies he learned about in our workshop; and a professor in agriculture who called to describe her success in using small group activity in a class of 110 students.

To publicize the communication activity that is going on in courses across the campus, we now sponsor at the end of each semester a half-day "show and tell" workshop during which faculty members from different disciplines give brief presentations about their uses of communication assignments in the classroom. To date, presenters have included professors in astrophysics, biology, chemistry,

horticulture, economics, engineering, history, languages, marketing, mathematics, and nursing. At last December's workshop, which attracted an audience of over 70 faculty members and administrators, participants heard from a physicist who has students write about scientific inaccuracies in Isaac Asimov's novels, and from a horticulturist who has her students record in a journal their impressions of a trek through the university's botanical gardens; the program also included presentations by four students, who described their experiences in experimental communication-intensive courses.

It is also apparent that support for the Pearce Center's mission is no longer confined to the endorsement of individual faculty members. A presentation about the CAC program is now included in the annual orientation program for new Clemson faculty members, and all faculty members receive an annual memo from the Provost encouraging them to attend a workshop. In response to invitations from deans and department heads, the center has conducted workshops specifically for faculty members in such fields as accounting, agriculture, forestry, horticulture, nursing, and political science. The Pearce Center is also actively involved in two long-term collaborative projects to develop a communication-intensive curriculum in specific disciplines. The first involves helping faculty members in the College of Engineering achieve the goals of their "Effective Technical Communication" (ETC) program, which aims to integrate an emphasis on writing and speaking throughout the engineering curriculum, and the second involves working with the Department of Finance to develop a comprehensive communication-intensive curriculum for its majors; the finance project, which is called the "Communications Initiative," is supported by a 5-year grant totaling $500,000, awarded by NationsBank expressly for this purpose.

Yet, as we shortly recognized, despite these admittedly encouraging sig..s of

an increased emphasis on communication in disparate disciplines and of wider agreement that addressing students' ability to communicate was a university-wide responsibility, we had made no systematic provision for documenting the impact of our programs and initiatives on (1) the attitudes of faculty members and students, (2) classroom practices, (3) students' communication abilities, or (4) student learning. The assessment of our programs was initially confined to evaluations from participants in the workshops; and, though these evaluations overwhelmingly document faculty support, they provide no reliable indication of the subsequent impact of the workshop experience on classroom practice or, ultimately, on either student learning or communication abilities.

To address the need to document the effects of our program--and to help the center meet the increasing call for assistance in implementing communication-based activities across the curriculum--the Pearce Center approached administrators of the English department and the speech program in spring 1991 with a proposal to institute an "assessment research team." The Pearce Center proposed to fund one-course annual released time for four faculty members, whose responsibilities would consist not only of collaborating with faculty members in other disciplines in developing communication-intensive projects but also in devising and implementing measures to assess the effect of the resulting initiatives.

The proposal was accepted and endorsed by both the English department and the speech program. Applications for membership on the team were solicited, and three faculty members from English and one from speech were selected. In addition to the four team members selected, the team includes the director of the Pearce Center, the holder of the endowed Campbell Chair in Technical Communication, and the assistant to the Campbell Chair, who is a part-time instructor in the Department of

English with a background in writing in the sciences.

The seven members of the team decided early on to organize their activities according to a descending hierarchy. At the highest level, the team would meet weekly as a group to plan large-scale assessment projects, to review progress on its activities, and to discuss readings with general implications for program assessment and for writing and speaking across the disciplines. At a lower level of organization, the team divided into two groups of three and four members, whose respective charges were to develop strategies for both implementing and assessing the communication-intensive initiatives in the College of Engineering and the Department of Finance. Finally, each member of the group was charged with developing individual projects that contributed both to the Pearce Center's overall goal of integrating communication activities in students' learning experiences and the research team's assessment goals.

The most significant challenge facing the research team was that what we set out to evaluate was by no means easy to measure. Although it is possible to achieve a fairly high level of interrater reliability among experienced graders who have agreed on assessment criteria, individual graders of writing and public speaking--especially if they come from different disciplines, are likely to apply very different criteria to the evaluation of a speech or a single piece of writing; a chemist and an English teacher operating independently of one another are likely to assess the same piece of writing very differently. In other words, there is no universal standard for what constitutes good student writing and speaking.

Another important challenge facing the research team was that our program's goals were based on a conception of communication with which faculty members in other disciplines were not likely to be familiar. When writing or speaking are assigned

in courses taught outside the English and speech departments, it is highly likely that it will be used primarily--if not exclusively--as an assessment measure. Academic writing and speaking are widely considered vehicles through which students demonstrate their knowledge and skills. As such, writing is invariably--often painstakingly--evaluated. Although we do not dispute the validity and appropriateness of approaching student writing and speaking in this way, we would argue that such a narrow consideration of finished products does not take advantage of writing and speaking as powerful tools for enhancing--as opposed to simply demonstrating--student learning.

One of the basic tenets of the communication across the curriculum movement is that integrating writing and speaking on a regular basis in the process of students learning course material can enhance both their understanding and their retention of that material. In contrast to the final draft writing or formal presentations we ask students to submit or perform for evaluation, these writing-and-speaking-to-learn assignments provide opportunities for students to communicate informally about the material they are learning. Moreover, given the informal, speculative nature of such writing and speaking (which may include having students keep a course journal, writing brief summaries of readings and lectures, or discussing specific topics in small groups), this kind of communicative activity cannot be evaluated in any conventional sense. We encourage faculty members to make such assignments <u>count</u> as a percentage of students' final grades, but we argue that grading them for grammar or structure contradicts and may even defeat the purpose of making writing and speaking a part of the learning process. Thus, our commitment to promoting writing and speaking as a learning tool in the classroom further complicates the task of program evaluation by introducing enhanced student learning as a desirable outcome of the

program.

The complexity and diversity of our program goals impose two inescapable qualifications on our efforts to evaluate the program. One, our program goals preclude our relying on a single assessment measure. Two, they caution us that the outcomes we hope to assess resist tidy quantification. Given these objectives and qualifications, the research team adopted the following guidelines for the approach it would take to assessment:

(1) it would attempt to focus as much of its research as possible on the specific contexts in which writing and speaking occurred;

(2) it would attempt to measure the effects of its activities from a variety of perspectives that would yield both quantitative and qualitative information, and

(3) it would plan to use the findings of its research to adjust and improve on its initiatives, hoping thereby to use assessment as a guide to improving teaching and enhancing student learning.

Since the research team has only been meeting since last September, we are not in a position to present definitive results or to attempt to defend a particular approach to assessing a program for integrating communication across the curriculum. What I propose instead is to outline some of the projects we have undertaken, to report selectively on some of our preliminary findings, and to indicate some of the directions in which we plan to proceed. However, we recognize that our initiatives have been largely defined, authorized, and accordingly circumscribed by the constraints of a particular academic culture; and, as such, we only propose them cautiously as a model for other institutions.

PROJECTS OF THE
PEARCE CENTER ASSESSMENT RESEARCH TEAM

1. A semester-long project by students in a business writing course to study whether faculty members and recent graduates believe Clemson University is adequately preparing its graduates to meet the demands of communicating in the workplace; the students' reports incorporate pedagogical and curricular recommendations for improving the communication abilities of students.

2. An experimental section of a technical writing course for mechanical engineering (ME) majors who were all enrolled in the same ME course. The teachers of the two courses collaborated in developing assignments and assessing the students' writing. Lab projects in the ME course served as the basis for several assignments in the technical writing course.

3. Ongoing case studies of student writing and speaking in two communication-intensive engineering courses: a junior-level electrical engineering course and a graduate-level industrial engineering course.

4. A long-term project to collect and analyze samples of papers written in a communication-intensive freshman engineering course, required of all engineering majors.

5. A survey of engineering students in several sections of the English department's technical writing course to study their attitudes about the College of Engineering's Effective Technical Communication program and their opinions of its effects on their learning and communication abilities.

6. Interviews with all faculty members in the Department of Finance in preparation for implementing the NationsBank "Communications Initiative" in fall 1992. The interviews inquire about such issues as the extent to which writing and speaking activities are currently integrated in finance courses, teachers' attitudes about the importance of assigning writing and speaking, and their perceptions of any problems facing the implementation of the "Communications Initiative."

7. A proposal to institute a portfolio system of assessment for the Department of Finance "Communications Initiative."

8. Pre- and post-workshop attitude surveys for faculty members who attend CAC workshops.

9. A survey of alumni of the CAC workshops to determine effects of the workshops on teaching practices and perceived effects on student learning and classroom culture.

10. A proposal to institute a pilot portfolio project to review and assess the writing of students in selected disciplines during their four years at Clemson. The portfolio would include writing samples from both general education courses (freshman English, sophomore literature, and junior-level writing courses) and courses in the students' majors.

SUMMARY OF SURVEY RESPONSES FROM FACULTY MEMBERS WHO HAVE ATTENDED COMMUNICATION-ACROSS-THE-CURRICULUM WORKSHOPS

Surveys were sent to 261 faculty members in all disciplines
141 surveys were returned--a 54% rate of response.

☞ **105 respondents said that their teaching had changed as a result of attending a CAC workshop; 17 said it had not changed. Among the specific changes mentioned were**

- **--more ungraded writing**
- **--more interaction with students**
- **--more faith in group work**
- **--more references to teacher's own writing**
- **--more awareness of writing process**
- **--more student input**

☞86 respondents stated that "integrating communication activities in courses had affected student learning and classroom culture"; only 4 said it had not; 19 said they were unsure of such effects. Among the specific effects mentioned were

--improved student retention of material
--increased student interest
--more open and cohesive classroom
--increased student involvement in learning; students "feel ownership"
--better essays on final exams
--increased interaction; "class is noisy"
--"students definitely learn from writing and speaking"
--new pressure of "majority tyranny" in such approaches

☞64 respondents reported that student feedback about an increased emphasis on writing and speaking in the classroom has been overwhelmingly positive; 18 described student reactions as "mixed"; and 11 described student reactions as primarily negative.

☞Specific favorable comments included

--support for the writing process and the opportunity to revise

--support for the opportunity to collaborate with peers

--support for increased emphasis on their participation; "students sense that I care about what they think"

☞Criticisms of the increased emphasis on communication included

--student complaints that dealing with peers' opinions "takes away from real information"; "student discussion is not as in-depth as lectures"

--students disagree a lot more about grades

--students require a lot more guidance

--students complain about increase in their work load

☞ **Respondents identified the following "obstacles or difficulties experienced in trying to integrate writing and speaking activities in courses":**

- **--class size too large**
- **--takes too much time to grade and takes up too much class time**
- **--pressure to cover material on syllabus; some material not conducive to writing and speaking activities**
- **--student apathy and resistance**
- **--teachers' lack of experience**
- **--teachers' own inhibitions and inertia**
- **--lack of incentives for such initiatives**
- **--lower evaluations**

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEWS WITH 13 FACULTY MEMBERS IN THE DEPARTMENT OF FINANCE

☞ All finance teachers agree that majors need the ability to write and speak effectively.

☞ Every teacher interviewed considers Clemson's finance majors very poorly prepared for the kind of writing and speaking they will be required to do on the job.

☞ Although some teachers specifically mentioned students' problems with grammar and spelling, most complained that student writing revealed little evidence of thinking:

- --not good at "envisioning alternatives in their writing or seeing the big picture"
- --students "can memorize but not apply concepts"
- --"they can't explain answers or numbers"
- --student writing is "word for word out of the book"
- --students rely on "rote memorization"

☞ A majority of the teachers interviewed stressed the importance of encouraging students to develop and display critical thinking and problem-solving skills in their writing:

- --need ability to summarize, interpret, and explain data to a variety of audiences
- --need to be able "to manipulate data and present the theory behind it"
- --importance of being able "to synthesize data and summarize succinctly"
- --"paramount importance of conceptual understanding and ability to manipulate concepts"
- --importance of summarizing data, drawing conclusions, "making a pitch" for particular solutions
- --importance of encouraging "individual viewpoints," instead of having them "just copy down what they read in the [news]paper"
- --importance of "giving students a chance to do more than repeat what they've read," of encouraging them to "interpret, analyze, and speculate"

☞ Every teacher interviewed agreed that improving students' communication skills depends on incorporating writing and speaking activities in finance courses:

- --importance of communicating in major "to practice communication skills in the area they are going to work in"
- --"students need to communicate in the context in which they will use it"
- --"students need to write and speak on a regular basis to develop communication skills"
- --"students don't get enough practice writing; consistent writing is the key to writing well"
- --"to develop communication skills courses must employ them; the solution is to integrate these skills consistently into courses"
- --"students don't get a chance to apply what they learn in general education in their major courses"

☞Three finance teachers favor a university-wide communication-across-the-curriculum requirement:

--"communication should be mandated across the board by the university"

--"writing and speaking must go on at every level of the curriculum"

--"we need a program that provides opportunity for students to become better communicators"

☞Three finance teachers specifically mentioned that they do not consider the finance curriculum presently suited to improving students' communication skills:

--"finance courses are not set up to foster skills in synthesis and summary"

--"finance projects are too confined to numbers and multiple choice exams"

--"numbers are inordinately emphasized" in finance courses

☞Four of the 13 finance teachers interviewed assign no writing in their courses, relying instead on multiple-choice exams to evaluate students.

☞Only three of the finance teachers interviewed give students the opportunity to revise their writing.

☞ Only one finance teacher uses peer editing; this same teacher is the only one who assigns "informal writing."

☞ Every teacher interviewed cited the large size of finance classes as the primary obstacle to incorporating communication activities in the classroom. Several teachers see this problem as worsening; three teachers who used to assign writing and speaking no longer do so, while the majority of finance teachers assign less writing and speaking than they used to. Finance classes average between 50-60 students, with a low of 30 and a high of 140.

☞ Eleven of the 13 teachers claimed that classes were too large to permit assigning oral presentations, despite their insistence that students needed to develop presentational skills.

☞ Several teachers anticipate student resistance to any increased emphasis on communication in finance courses.

☞ Several teachers also noted that the success of the "Communications Initiative" depends on changing the department's reward system to provide incentives for teacher participation. At present research is disproportionately emphasized, and teachers who take the time to integrate communication activities in the classroom are not rewarded for doing so.